

**Title—The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution**  
**Author—C.L.R. James**  
**Year—1938 (2001 Edition)**

Categories: French Empire, Haiti, Revolution, Colonialism

Place: Haiti

Time: 1791-1803

Argument Synopsis:

C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* attempts to provide a detailed overview of the events of the Haitian revolution from 1791 until 1803, with a focus on the political career of Toussaint L'Ouverture. As it was published in 1938, James did not utilize participant observation or interviews as part of his research process, relying on more traditional documentary sources. He highlights the French National Archives as his main field of research, bolstered by documents from the colonial archives. James strives to produce a comprehensive account of the San Domingo revolution, finding the existing literature to be insufficient. It was difficult to find in English or French a comprehensive and well-balanced treatment of the revolution. Thus, he embarks on detailing the events of the revolution, with an eye on Toussaint and his supposed failures.

James' traces the developments in San Domingo, from the establishment of the colony up through its status as an independent Black state. James underscores the brutality of the sugar trade, revealing the strenuous labor required for harvesting and the high death toll. He explores the hierarchy that existed on the island between whites, mulattoes, and blacks, in order to situate the events of the revolution into a wider context of the island's race relations. The tense race relations resulted in the massacre of the whites on the island after independence, over fears of returning colonialism. This massacre had primarily negative effects for the trajectory of the nation, according to James.

While the focus of the book is on the unfolding of the San Domingo revolution, the political movements of Toussaint undergird the analysis, specifically the decisions that led to his defeat. The book uses the story of Toussaint as a central organizing theme in order to trace the development of the revolution. James' probes Toussaint's mistakes, arguing that it was Toussaint's unwavering commitment to the ideals of the French Revolution coupled with his belief that the French connection was necessary for the development of civilization that ruined him, in the end.

Although it was first published in 1939, *The Black Jacobins* remains the quintessential work on the Haitian Revolution. James recognized that the revolution could be seen as a precursor to the struggles of African decolonization to come in the twentieth century. He concludes his book with the argument that the massacre of all the remaining whites on Haiti was a tragedy for the country and can be seen as the cause of many of its continued difficulties into the present.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The Haitian Revolution (began 1791) occurred near concurrently with the French Revolution (began 1789), making it more difficult for the French to hold onto their colony
- Toussaint believed that in order to be a successful country, Haiti would need to maintain a connection to the French metropole